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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

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Landmark/District:	<b>Capitol Hill Historic District</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	<b>535 8<sup>th</sup> Street, SE</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consent
		<input type="checkbox"/> Concept
Meeting Date:	<b>June 28, 2012</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Case Number:	<b>12-417</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Amanda Molson</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

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Building owner National Community Church, with plans prepared by Superior Signs, requests Board approval for the installation of a blade sign at 535 8<sup>th</sup> Street, SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

### Property Description

Originally constructed in 1906 as a two-story brick building, 535 8<sup>th</sup> Street, SE was altered significantly in 1909 to serve as “Meaders” movie theater. A photograph from 1914 shows the c. 1909 blind arcade false-front, with light bulbs outlining the building itself, the signs advertising “Motion Pictures,” and the marquee below. After another renovation in 1927 and brief periods as the “New” and then the “Family” movie theater, the building reopened as the “Academy” movie theater in 1933, with a large illuminated blade sign mounted to the building’s facade during that time. The building ceased theater operations in 1962, serving as the People’s Church in recent decades with a large cross having replaced the old theater sign. The property was recently sold to the National Community Church, which will use the space for meetings and films.

### Proposal

The applicant proposes to install an illuminated blade sign in keeping with the character of the “Academy” sign in-place from the 1930s through the 1960s. A photograph taken in 1951 has served as a model for the new sign, though modern-day code restrictions pertaining to height and projections necessitate a slightly smaller version (17’-4” tall and 42” wide), such that it that will not extend above the roofline, as the original sign did. Utilizing channel letters and clear light bulbs reminiscent of the original “Meader” signage, the new sign will advertise the building’s newest rebirth as the “Miracle” theater.

### Evaluation

This change in ownership and programming provides an exciting opportunity to restore lost historic features and to more clearly evidence the building’s early use. The Board’s sign

regulations encourage the retention of existing historic signs and the replication of a close copy when vintage signs have been removed:

### **2513 Vintage and Historic Signs**

*2513.1 Vintage and historic signs express distinctive characteristics or aesthetics of an earlier period and provide character to historic property.*

*2513.2 A vintage sign should be considered for preservation or reuse where feasible.*

*2513.5 Replication or installation of a close copy of a documented historic sign if considered an appropriate preservation treatment unless it clearly conflicts with the D.C. Building Code or the Board's design standards.*

In addition to replicating the historic condition, this particular sign also meets the standard that new signage should relate to the subject property's specific character. Though this sign would arguably be visually overwhelming if placed on a smaller commercial structure, this building's height, considerable width, use as a theater, and prominence on Barracks Row justify and even call for a sign of this scale:

### **2504 General Standards for Signage**

*2504.1 Signage shall be appropriate to the building, site, or historic district it will affect. Signage shall relate to, take advantage of, and be compatible with the building's particular composition, scale, design features, and architectural character.*

*2504.2 Signage shall be appropriate to the identified or advertised use. Its scale and design character shall be commensurate with the size and nature of the entity and its location.*

The illumination proposed is consistent with the Board's standards, which discourage the use of internally illuminated box signs and encourage channel letter signage as an alternative. This proposed sign utilizes a painted metal surface, with illumination restricted to channel letters calling out the name of the theater and clear light bulbs running along the periphery. Recognizing that this commercial building is set in close proximity to residential buildings, the applicants have agreed, in consultation with the HPO and community, to keep the level of illumination fairly low. Additionally, the applicants have assured the HPO that the illumination will be steady, without blinking or flashing lights, per the Board's standards:

### **2507 Design Characteristics of Appropriate Signage**

*2507.5 Sign illumination shall be consistent with the following criteria and considerations:*

*(j) Sign illumination shall be by steady light only. Pulsing, blinking, or flashing lights are not permitted.*

The proposed sign is consistent with the Board's sign standards as they relate to reinstating lost vintage signs when possible and carefully considering such issues as scale, materials, and illumination as they relate to the subject property. Additionally, the proposed sign, which will become a new visual "landmark" on Barracks Row and will educate visitors about this building's historic use as a theater, certainly comports with the Board's general standard that encourages creativity, diversity, and individuality in new signage.

**Recommendation**

The HPO recommends that the Board approve the application as consistent with the purposes of the preservation act, with the condition that the permit drawings clearly denote that all signage illumination shall be by steady light.